

Unities

In growing old, one grows more foolish and wise--Chinese fortune cookie proverb

The histories of avant garde film and video have been written separately, as if the work produced in each tradition was completely autonomous. This is true of both the formal histories written in critical books and articles on the media avant garde, and in the informal, word of mouth histories that circulate in legendary fashion between teachers and students, masters and apprentices, exhibitors and publics. These separate histories are also partially articulated in institution discourses such as distribution catalogues, festival and other exhibition practices, educational structures, and in the adjoining areas of commercial and nonprofit small scale media production.

I want to question this separation--its causes, its history, and its pragmatic implications for the present and the future of independent experimental media, but most of all I want to challenge the theoretical-critical basis for the distinction between film and video art.

Now I'm not saying that there is no ontological difference between film and video. There is, even if developments such as High Definition Television and the current normative process of mixing film and video in various postproduction practices seem to challenge some of the most frequently invoked differences. Film involves projected images read by reflected light and video exists as a glowing screen, except, of course, when we view video as a projected beam and when we see experimental films broadcast on PBS or cablecast on Arts & Entertainment or Bravo. Well, hmm,. let me back up a little and start again. Film involves theatrical presentation while video--whoops!...Well, there really is a difference, isn't there? Don't we all really know it?

Ok, ok, I'm setting things up to make a point: experimental film and video artists often assert the difference between the two media as inherent, as ontological, when in fact they are for most part conventional, institutional, and definitely gradually disappearing. But that doesn't deal with the emotional, the embodied, the felt difference that experimental makers and critics, historians and enthusiasts experience and recall when thinking about this issue. And these emotions can be powerful as witnessed in the now long standing controversy in Canyon Cinema about admitting videos to the distribution co-op.

The controversy is instructively typical. What started innocently enough as Canyon selling a few videos of films made by members of the experimental film distribution coop because a huge controversy when some film purists in the group

claimed that videos were illegitimate in a film coop and worst of all--would take over and push out film. Great flaming paranoia

We might laugh, but the personal emotional investment is immense
(own story?)

The divergent histories of film and video art in the U.S. explains some of the differences. experimental film has a long history, with notable examples from every decade since the 1920s whereas experimental video, as legend has it, started in the mid-60s with Nam June Paik's first portapak. By that time experimental film had achieved quantitative and qualitative power. The New American Cinema was recognized in the art world and ==through scandal--ion the popular press with taboo breaking films gaining attention, if not acclaim. It's enough to mention Warhol to make the point. Experimental film gained a youth based audience as well as bohemian endorsement, as J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum detail in their book on the phenomenon, *Midnight Movies*. Festivals were established, new screening venues created, the media arts category was established through foundation and NEA support, distribution coops were established, some commercial distributors (such as Audio Brandon) began to pay attention and distribute some films while smaller distributors staked out a claim (Grove Press, Serious Business Company)./ The 60's counterculture endorsed film experimentation and avant garde film makers, for the most part, were part of the counter culture. The boom in College and university film studies and filmmaking programs began in earnest and were sustained so that by the 1970s some experimental filmmakers were being hired as college teachers, giving them a stable base and the opportunity to establish their version of history and the nature of the field.

Video art remained in its early stages of development, sometimes linked to activist documentaries (such as TVTV's reports on political conventions and the Guru ---- phenomenon, and in the art world performance art (Paik-Moorman, Joan Jonas, etc. _ and sculpture (especially with installation) more than independent film. We need to remember that at this time in the 60's and 70s 16mm film maintained a very powerful industrial support system because it was the standard for TV news gathering and the industrial/educational market. Because of this, 16mm filmmakers had an unrecognized "free ride" in that the material infrastructure of production was large enough to create substantial margins and it was on that periphery that an experimental film culture could be sustained. And at some moments, the industrial sector could even provide employment (Brakhage before *Water Window* Baby Moving, others...

Video faced a very different situation. The world of U.S. broadcast television had no margins¹. Portapak video was rigidly excluded from tv and from academic film studies. Diffusion was complicated. Videos could be bicycled around and easily duplicated--to other people who had portapaks--but the film dominated or broadcast dominated the environment. Institutions wanted no part of it. For this reason the artistic expression of video is sometimes traced back to broadcast studio innovators such as comedian Ernie Kovacs.

Another important and frequently unnoticed phenomenon emerges here: the world of independent film was overwhelmingly the world of white guys (straight and gay). The Founding meeting of the New American cinema had only one woman (Shirley Clarke) and one African American (Edward Bland). The pattern remained in place. But video took off in a different direction with Korean American Paik involved from the start. Women videomakers were common throughout the 1970's as the field grew, and as original makers, not just girlfriends. Since experimental film first acquired prestige within the academy and art school, video was left as an underdeveloped area. But interestingly enough, as such it was much more open to women and minorities. And it could be learned and practiced thriftily in public access television. We see the results today in comparing the catalogues of the video Data Bank or Electronic Art Intermix with those of Canyon Cinema or the New York Filmmaker's Coop.

¹ Saturday Night Live in its early years in the mid Seventies showed some short comic films, but never tapes)